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## The Impact of Charles Williams' Death on C.S. Lewis

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Recounts the beginnings of the friendship of Lewis and Williams and Williams's later association with the Inklings until his death following complications from surgery in May 1945. Discusses the effect of his death on C.S. Lewis's thoughts about mortality and reprints his poem "On the Death of Charles Williams."

### Keywords

Inklings; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Charles Williams; Williams, Charles—Friends and associates—C.S. Lewis



West to fight the power of Sauron. There is no account of an initiation for their work, except for Gandalf's battle with the Balrog near the end of his career in Middle Earth. But magical powers they certainly do have.

From the beginning Saruman's gifts were related to power and the domination of others, even before he turned traitor. His specialty is Ring-dore, and he makes rings himself. He is able to work spells on the minds of others. For example, as Gandalf tells Gimli, "Saruman could look like me in your eyes, if it suited his purpose..." He casts a spell over the minds of his listeners at the entrance to Orthanc, one which several are unable to resist, and Theoden resists only with the greatest difficulty.

It was Saruman's magic that drove Sauron out of Dol Guldur during the action of *THE HOBBIT*, and Gandalf wrongly anticipates that he may now have some weapon which would drive back the Nazgul.

Gandalf's wizardry seems to center around a certain Secret Fire, the Flame of Anor. He employs a magic staff, magic words and spells.

But the great contrast between them lies precisely in the fact that Saruman forsakes his destiny as outlined in the commands given to the Five Wizards when they were sent out: to combat Sauron, but not by his kind of power; to avoid all use of force or fear against the dwellers in Middle Earth. Now, a traitor, he seeks to overthrow Sauron by wielding the One Ring himself; as a beginning he makes war on Rohan.

That he feels these evil acts are justified by his high destiny is clear from his appeal to Gandalf at Orthanc: "Are we not both members of a high and ancient order, most excellent in Middle-Earth?... Let us understand one another, and dismiss from thought these lesser folk!" The other listeners, half-bound by the spell, are convinced of this: "Of loftier mold these two were made: reverend and wise... The door would be closed, and [the others] would be left outside, dismissed to await allotted work or punishment." Saruman often uses the title *The Wise* to indicate that they have a separate moral code: "We must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see."

Only the Wise. Here, Saruman is saying, is the loneliness of our high destiny. Lesser creatures cannot understand. It is even lonelier than that, Gandalf reminds him; only one hand can wield the Ring."

Rejecting Saruman's temptation, Gandalf replies that it is Saruman who cannot understand him. Like Uncle Andrew, Saruman has tried to make himself stupider than he really was, and has succeeded.

It is true that there are ways in which Gandalf is lonely. There are many things he cannot share with the hobbits. It is true that he is often alone on distant journeys. But the final isolation of Saruman, hated and feared by Wormtongue who does not dare to leave him--is not Gandalf's. Gandalf can enjoy alike the company of the wisest Elves and the simplest hobbits because he acknowledges that he and they are finally part of the same plan; he refuses to be free from common restrictions. He masters himself and his own desire for the Ring, while Saruman not only loses his magic but becomes totally the slave of the meanest and pettiest malice.

In summary: Digory's judgment on the Magician with a High and Lonely Destiny is well borne out by the comparison with others in the tradition. Most of them are driven by inner hunger and are self-deceived. Those who come closest to greatness, Apollonius and Gandalf, are those who master themselves and do not claim to be free from the common restrictions. Nor are they ever deeply lonely; they are sensitive to the value in others, and have inner resources out of which they draw to become self-giving.

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# The Impact of Charles Williams' Death on C.S. Lewis

by Roland M. Kawano

May, 1945 was important both in the lives of England and C.S. Lewis. England was just completing a long and wearisome war; on the seventh of May Germany was to surrender unconditionally at Rheims. The war years brought Lewis a growing reputation and the cognomen, "Apostle to the Skeptics,"<sup>1</sup> especially with the American publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1943.<sup>2</sup> In Lewis' life May also brought the death of his good friend, Charles Williams. Earlier, the war had brought Williams into much closer contact with Oxford and the Inklings, the literary discussion group to which both Williams and Lewis belonged.

An editor with Amen House of Oxford University Press, Charles Williams had not been able to finish at University College for lack of finances and so got his education editing papers at Amen House.<sup>3</sup> Although he was best known for *The Figure of Beatrice*, *The English Poetic Mind*, and *Poetry at Present*, Lewis felt that Williams' criticism was his least valuable work. Williams was a romantic theologian, "one who is theological about romance... who considers the theological implications of those experiences which are called romantic." Lewis had initially heard of Williams at a dinner where Dr. R. W. Chapman called Williams; novels "spiritual shockers," but it was not until several years later when Lewis spent an evening with Nevil Coghill that Lewis was fully awakened to Williams. Professor Coghill was pregnant with Williams' *The Place of the Lion*. Lewis left that evening with Coghill's copy and the next day wrote to Williams, neither of whom had met before, to congratulate him. By return mail Williams wrote that he was just about to do the same for Lewis' *Allegory of Love*.<sup>4</sup>

Although Lewis and Williams became fast friends, they saw little of one another since Lewis was teaching at Oxford and Williams was at

work in London at the Amen House. But the outbreak of the war shattered the routine schedules of many lives. On September 3, 1939 the Amen House evacuated from London to South-Field House in East Oxford with the staff billeted throughout the city.<sup>5</sup>

Williams' removal to Oxford brought his genius to both the University and to the Inklings. With the depletion of the English faculty at Oxford, Williams' "standing as scholar and poet was quickly recognized."<sup>6</sup> He "was soon making an Oxford reputation both as a lecturer and as a private tutor,"<sup>7</sup> and within three years was conferred an honorary M.A. degree by the university.<sup>8</sup> Williams' advent to Oxford also brought him into closer contact with the Inklings with whom he was soon to be a frequent member.

The Inklings usually met twice a week. On Tuesday mornings about an hour before lunch, they met at the Eagle and Child pub in St. Giles. Because of its habitual character, this assemblage must have made quite an impression on Oxford during the war. Lewis' brother, Warren, notes that "these gatherings must have attained a certain notoriety, for in a detective novel of the period a character is made to say, 'It must be Tuesday--there's Lewis going into the Bird.'<sup>9</sup> Normally reticent about his private life,<sup>10</sup> Lewis withheld the name of the pub in his account of the meeting. He notes that they met "on Tuesday mornings in the best of all public-houses for draught cider, whose name it would be madness to reveal." Although the Inklings loved a good mug, Lewis reveals that Williams completely abstained. "I must confess that with Miss Dorothy Sayers I have seen him drink only tea: but that was neither his fault nor hers."<sup>11</sup>

The Inklings also met after dinner on Thursday evenings in Lewis'



rooms at Magdalen college. There were no fixed rules to the meetings although it was understood that "ten-thirty was as late as one could decently arrive." There was, however, a kind of unvarying ritual. When half-a-dozen or so had arrived, pipes lit and tea poured, Jack (as Lewis always wanted himself called in preference to Clive Staples) would say, "Well, has anybody got anything to read?" Out would come a manuscript, and we would settle down to sit in judgement upon it--real unbiased judgement, too, since we were no mutual admiration society: praise for good work was unstinted, but censure for bad work--or even not-so-good work--was often brutally frank. To read for the Inklings was a formidable ordeal.<sup>12</sup> The object of the Inklings was to discuss and understand literary narrative, or as Lewis put it, "The problems of narrative as such--seldom heard of in modern critical writings--were constantly before our minds."<sup>13</sup>

Here in Lewis' Magdalen rooms J. R. R. Tolkien read his "New Hobbit" as the Inklings first named it, the precursor to his trilogy, The Lord of the Rings. Roy Campbell read "translations of a couple of Spanish poems," David Cecil read a chapter of his forthcoming book on Gray, and Warren Lewis, a scholar on the reign of Louis XIV, read "the first chapter of my first book."<sup>14</sup> Charles Williams read his All Hallow's Eve and Lewis himself read his Perelandra. They were all read aloud, each chapter as it was written. They owe a good deal to the hard-hitting criticism of the circle.<sup>15</sup> Father Gervase Mathews, who will appear later, was also present.<sup>16</sup> The Inklings shared a deep comradeship, but friendship did not bar harsh criticism when it was needed. H. M. Blamires, one of Lewis' former students, wrote that Lewis "had a near-fanatical devotion to Charles Williams, but when Williams wrote a bad book Lewis described it as "bloody awful."<sup>17</sup>

On the world scene the war in the European theatre was drawing to a close. On the second of May Germany surrendered in Italy. On the fifth they surrendered in Northwest Germany, Holland and Denmark. And on the seventh Germany made the complete and unconditional surrender at Rheims.

The English expected news of peace to be released any day. Oxford University press promised a holiday in celebration, and most of the staff of Southfield House were already planning to go to London. On Tuesday May eighth Williams commented to Helen Peacock, the Dorinda of his masques and one of his oldest friends who joined the Oxford Press staff in 1916, "Well, you and I, Dorinda, will be there as usual at our desks." Later in the day Williams met Gervase Mathew and asked him to say a Mass "for anyone I have ever loved in any way." Father Mathew did not object, said the Mass, but felt that Williams had a "sense that he was going to die."

On Wednesday May ninth the news of peace was released, and Southfield house was deserted except for Williams, Miss Peacock and a few others. That night Williams went out with Anne Spaulding, the daughter of the family he lived with in Oxford, to watch the English bonfires lit for victory. However, seized with pain the next day, Williams cancelled all his work arrangements, staying in his rooms. That Thursday evening the Inklings met without him.

Since the war had separated them, on Friday Mrs. Williams came up from London. Although the pain had disappeared, Williams was taken to Radcliffe Hospital where he was operated on for a recurrence of internal troubles which had first appeared eleven years earlier. Williams never recovered consciousness and died after fifty-nine years on Tuesday May fifteenth.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Inklings learned that Williams was at Radcliffe, they did not at all expect anything serious. On Tuesday morning, the fifteenth, just before they were to meet at the Eagle and Child, Lewis went to Radcliffe to lend Williams a book and perhaps to take back a message from him to the Inklings. When he arrived, he learned of Williams' death. He went to the pub to tell them what had happened:

When I joined them with my actual message--it was only a few minutes walk from the Infirmary but, I remember, the very streets looked different--I had some difficulty in making them believe or even understand what had happened. The world seemed to us at that moment primarily a strange one.

They began to verify the experience of many bereaved peoples, of "the ubiquitous presence of a dead man, as if he had ceased to meet us in particular places in order to meet us everywhere."<sup>19</sup>

Charles Williams was buried in St. Cross Churchyard, Holywell, Oxford,<sup>20</sup> "where lie the bodies of Kenneth Grahame and P. V. M. Ben-ecke." After the funeral one of Williams' friends told Lewis as they were sitting in Addison's walk:

Our Lord told the disciples it was expedient for them that He should go away for otherwise the Comforter would not come to them. I do not think it blasphemous to suppose that what was true archetypally, and in eminence, of His death may, in the appropriate degree, be true of the deaths of all His followers.

Williams' death had a profound effect on C. S. Lewis for he says, "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed." Only after Williams' death did the Inklings realize "what a small and late addition we were to the company of those who loved him, and whom we loved."<sup>21</sup>

As to the total impact Williams' death had on Lewis' writings, one cannot even surmise. But there appeared soon after a letter, an obituary, and a poem on Charles Williams. The letter was written three days after Williams' death on May eighteenth to Owen Barfield, a London solicitor and philologist. It says that Williams' death was an odd exper-

ience and the first severe loss Lewis had suffered. It corroborated Lewis' belief in immortality, it swept away his horror and disgust at the whole realm of funerals, coffins and graves, and it greatly reduced his fears about ghosts. "To put it in a nutshell: what the idea of death has done to him is nothing to what he has done to the idea of death. Hit it for six: yet it used to rank as a fast bowler!"<sup>22</sup>

The obituary notice to "Charles Walter Stanby Williams (1886-1945)" appeared May twenty-fourth in The Oxford Magazine.

The poem first entitled "On the Death of Charles Williams" was first published in Britain To-day in August of 1945.<sup>23</sup> Later Lewis changed the title to "To Charles Williams." It reads:

Your death blows a strange bugle call, friend, and  
all is hard  
To see plainly or record truly. The new light im-  
poses change,  
Re-adjusts all a life-landscape as it thrusts down  
its probe from the sky,  
To create shadows, to reveal waters, to erect hills  
and deepen glens.  
The slant alters. I can't see the old contours.  
It's a larger world  
Than I once thought it. I wince, caught in the bleak  
air that blows on the ridge.  
Is it the first sting of the great winter, the world-  
waning? Or the cold of spring?

A hard question and worth talking a whole night on.  
But with whom?  
Of whom now can I ask guidance? With what friend  
concerning your death.  
Is it worthwhile to exchange thoughts unless--oh un-  
less it were you?<sup>24</sup>

His death gained an added theological reality--it significantly altered the present world for those who remained behind. Reading Williams' very novels is akin to that experience--the impact becomes of such an intensity that our very perspectives of reality are re-oriented.

#### Footnotes

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3. Alice Mary Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams, (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1959), 22.
4. C. S. Lewis, ed., Essays Presented to Charles Williams, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), vi, vii, viii.
5. Ibid., viii; Hadfield, Charles Williams, 164.
6. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 165.
7. C. S. Lewis, Essays, ix.
8. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 165.
9. W. H. Lewis, "Memoir of C. S. Lewis," in Letters of C. S. Lewis, by C. S. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 14.
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11. C. S. Lewis, Essays, v, ix.
12. W. H. Lewis, "Memoir," 13, 14.
13. C. S. Lewis, Essays, v.
14. W. H. Lewis, "Memoir," 14.
15. C. S. Lewis, Essays, v.
16. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 176. Father Mathews contributes "Marriage and Amour Courtois in Late-Fourteenth Century England" to the Essays ed. by C. S. Lewis.
17. Quoted in W. H. Lewis, "Memoirs," 18-19.
18. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 48, 208, 209.
19. C. S. Lewis, Essays, xiii, xiv.
20. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 209.
21. C. S. Lewis, Essays, ix, xiv.
22. C. S. Lewis, Letters, 206.
23. Walter Hooper, "A Bibliography of the Writings of C. S. Lewis," Light on C. S. Lewis, 132, 138.
24. C. S. Lewis, Poems, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 105.

